

# Rabies

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## What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system. Rabies usually infects only animals, but animals can transmit the virus to humans. Animals that have bitten a human should be reviewed carefully for symptoms of rabies.

## How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is found in the saliva of infected animals and is spread through a bite or scratch from an infected animal. Transmission may also occur if an infected animal's saliva comes into contact with broken skin or mucous membranes such as the mouth or eyes.

Animals most affected by the rabies virus are wild animals such as skunks, raccoons, coyotes, foxes, and bats. Unvaccinated dogs and cats could also spread the virus.

## How common is rabies?

Rabies among humans in the United States is rare. In 2009, only 4 human cases were reported in the United States.

## What are the symptoms of rabies?

The time between exposure and the onset of symptoms is variable but averages 2 to 12 weeks, with some reports of up to one year of incubation.

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever, weakness, fatigue, general anxiety or worry, and pain or numbness at the exposure site. The disease eventually progresses to spasms of the throat and the muscles used for breathing, convulsions, paralysis, hallucinations, abnormal behavior, insomnia, and death. By the time that any symptoms appear, the disease is almost 100% fatal. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

## What is the treatment for rabies?

Once symptoms have appeared, there is no treatment for rabies. The best rabies prevention is immediate, thorough cleansing of animal bites and scratches with soap and warm water, as well as contacting your doctor immediately with information about the incident. The following information will help your doctor assess your rabies risk: the type of animal involved, the location of the incident, the vaccination status of the animal (for domestic animals), how the exposure occurred, and whether the animal can be safely captured and tested for rabies. Do NOT try to capture the animal yourself. Call local animal control to assist in the capture, isolation, and testing of the animal.

For exposed people who are not already immunized for rabies, a single dose of immune globulin and 4 doses of rabies vaccine should be administered. The vaccine is given over

a course of 2 weeks. This series should begin as soon as possible after the exposure. These injections will not be helpful after symptoms appear.

### **How can the spread of rabies be prevented?**

- Keep vaccinations up-to-date for all dogs, cats, and ferrets.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come into contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance immediately.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood, as they may be unvaccinated and/or infected.
- Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces where they may come in contact with people and pets.
- When traveling abroad, avoid direct contact with wild animals and dogs. Rabies is common in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Before leaving, consult with a physician or your local health department about the risk of exposure.

### **How do I get more information on rabies?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department  
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/>

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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#### **Calhoun County Public Health Department**

190 E. Michigan Avenue, Suite A100  
Battle Creek, Michigan 49014  
Tel: (269) 969-6383  
Fax: (269) 969-6488